

**“Re-discovery”
and the Transformation
of the
Dumbarton Oaks Gardens Film**

Presented by: Rona Razon

Session 16

Stop Me If You've Heard This One: Reformatting Audiovisual Collections

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Rochester, NY

SLIDE 1:

- My name is Rona Razon, and I'm the Archivist in the Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives of Dumbarton Oaks, located in Washington, D.C.

SLIDE 2:

- The emphasis of my talk this morning is about the "re-discovery," importance of documentation, and preservation of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film, which is a unique footage of the treasured gardens in Dumbarton Oaks, likely recorded from the 1920s to the 1940s.
- The film exhibits Dumbarton Oaks as the private residence of Robert and Mildred Bliss in the 1920s and 1930s, and then it transitions to the 1940s when the Blisses gave the property to the President and Fellows of Harvard College, held by the Trustees for Harvard University.

SLIDE 3:

- I will also highlight the transformation of the film, from a home movie to an institutional archival treasure.

SLIDE 4:

- Both Robert and Mildred came from a well-to-do family. Mildred's father Demas Barnes was the US Congressman from the Brooklyn District in the 1860s and had invested in patent medicines, including Fletcher's Laxatives.¹

SLIDE 5:

- Robert, on the other hand, came from a family of politics. He served in the US Foreign Service starting in the 1910s and became the US Ambassador to Argentina in 1927.²

SLIDE 6:

- 12 years after their marriage, the Blisses purchased Dumbarton Oaks in October 1920 and "[transformed] the Victorian house into a Gregorian revival mansion and [created] garden rooms and vistas."³
- Before taking permanent residency in Dumbarton Oaks in 1933, when Robert retired from the Foreign Service,⁴ they were in-and-out between the United States, Europe, and South America.

SLIDE 7:

- During this period, Robert and Mildred worked and relied on Beatrix Farrand⁵ to transform Dumbarton Oaks into an English and Italian garden.
- Besides being known as Edith Wharton's niece, Farrand was a reputable landscape architect that was commissioned "to design gardens for private residences, public parks, botanical gardens [... and] the White House." She was one of the founding members and only female member of the American Society of Landscape Architects.⁶

SLIDE 8:

- In November 1940, Dumbarton Oaks became an institute of Harvard University and became a home of the humanities that supports scholarship in Byzantine, Pre-Columbian, and Garden and Landscape Studies.

SLIDE 9:

- In August 2010, we began to assess the 16 mm films in ICFA's cold storage, which is located on the 1st floor of the Library. (We have about 30 films.)
- In order to make sense of what we have, we compared our existing records with the films and created an inventory to improve intellectual and physical control of our film collection.

SLIDE 10:

- From this, we learned that we have films of the Red Sea Monasteries of St. Paul and St. Anthony in Egypt, recorded in 1930, and of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul in the 1930s to the 1940s that were both filmed by the Byzantine Institute.

SLIDE 11:

- The Byzantine Institute, which is one of the leading protagonists in ICFA's collections, was a non-profit organization that was founded in 1930 and whose mission was to preserve and document Byzantine art and architecture. They are known for uncovering the mosaics in Hagia Sophia from 1931 and on, after being covered in plaster by the Ottomans after 1453.

SLIDE 12:

- After the assessment, we decided to interview ICFA's former curator in early 2011 to learn more about the department's archival holdings. As Natalia Teteriatnikov described the different collections she acquired from donors, she also mentioned that we have a

film of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens. Surely, this was a big surprise to us, especially to me since I thought that I had documented all of our existing films in 2010.

- She also described an effort to convert the Byzantine Institute films to Beta and VHS in the late 1990s, but the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film was not included (maybe because of budget constraints or other reasons). As a result, the film is not recorded on any of the legacy documents and databases.

SLIDE 13:

- Natalia also mentioned that a recording of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film was made when she assessed the film in the late 1990s. After that conversation, we found this tape and as you can see, it is simply labeled “Dumbarton Oaks Film” and “Daphni.”
- Immediately after that, I **re-assessed** our film collection **to find the film**. When I couldn't find it by simply checking the information written on each leader, I decided to carefully unroll each film to check the first few frames. At first, I merely saw images of mosaics in Hagia Sophia but after a few rolls, I started to see trees and people by the pool on the film marked “Red Sea Monastery Origins.” Of course, this was odd since the film doesn't contain any scenes from that site.
- So basically, the lesson here is: **Proper Documentation and Labeling are both extremely essential!**

SLIDE 14:

- After our discovery or more appropriately our “re-discovery,” we decided to inspect the films – to see exactly what is on each film and to check their physical condition.
- Since we don't have any film equipment to view the films, we decided to ask the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Human Studies Film Archives if we could use their equipment such as their inspection table and footage counter.
- Preservation Specialists in the Audio-Visual Conservation at the Library of Congress were very kind and generous of their time. As you can see from this slide, Amy Gallick and Lynanne Schweighofer both reserved their day to help us inspect and date the first half of our film collection.
- Having done this inspection, we found out that we actually have three rolls of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film.

SLIDE 15:

- We also scheduled a second trip in the Smithsonian Institution Human Studies Film Archives in Suitland, MA, where my colleague Gnder Varinliođlu and I completed the assessment project.
- Big thanks to the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, we were able to determine the contents and describe each film in our collection. As you can see here, we tried to document and describe the contents of the films as much as possible, which became really handy for the inventory.

SLIDE 16:

- We also measured the level of decay for each film and learned that most of the films have unfortunately started to suffer from vinegar syndrome. And as many of you are aware, this is a common type of deterioration with acetate or safety films.

SLIDE 17:

- After the assessment project, we researched various film labs that could preserve or digitize our film collection.
- In October 2011, based on reviews by various film specialists and archivists in the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, and the University of Maryland, we decided to send the films to Colorlab in Rockville, Maryland. Technicians there patiently explained the different methods that they needed to do before and after the digitization process, such as ultrasonic cleaning and rewash treatment.

SLIDE 18:

- **But of course, digitization is not that simple!**
- There were many factors that we had to consider. For instance, did we want SD or HD transfer?

Since I was not aware of the differences between SD and HD transfers, I asked various film specialists and after consulting with them, ICFA decided on SD transfer since:

- 1) First, we learned that badly deteriorated films such as the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film will likely look the same in HD and SD transfers, and so we could not justify spending on a digitization process in HD that is 4x more expensive than an SD transfer.⁷
- 2) Second, we did not or still do not have sufficient storage space for really large digital files.

- 3) Lastly, an HD transfer also meant that we would need to invest on a monitor that is HD-capable since high definition frame size is typically 1920x1080 pixels; and of course, was that really necessary for our needs?

SLIDE 19:

- Another problem was the peeling issue. As you can see on the left and middle of the slide, the emulsion of the film has started to peel off from the base and on the right, the emulsion is completely gone.
- Technicians at Colorlab informed us ahead of time and recommended that they didn't think that "replasticizing will be helpful for these reels because that process may end up worsening the peel issue."⁸
- Because of this, Colorlab suggested to reinforce the emulsion with a splicing tape to prevent more emulsion from flaking off. However, we were worried that this irreversible method may damage the film in long-term. And so once again, we asked for advice from film specialists and learned that unfortunately once "the emulsion has lifted away from the base, there is very little anyone can do to re-adhere it."⁹
- And so the big question was, is the content more important than the integrity of the format?
- After careful consideration, Colorlab and ICFA decided on the use of splicing tape. We realized that even if the method was irreversible, it was more important to capture the content now and make it accessible to our community, rather than to worry about what would happen to the film or the object itself in the next 5 or 10 years.
- More importantly, we needed to save them now since these are the only moving accounts of the Blisses and Dumbarton Oaks before and after it became an institution (**and I should stress in color!**).

SLIDE 20

- Colorlab completed the transfer in March 2012, and for each film, we have copies on DVDs, Digital Betacam SPs, on a portable external hard drive, and on a server.
- For greater access, ICFA decided to upload the digital files online and share them on Vimeo. We decided to use Vimeo instead of YouTube because we like how Vimeo clearly and visibly displays pertinent information, especially the licensing information. It's important for us to point out that while the films are accessible to everyone for research and publication purposes, users cannot sell the films for commercial use.

SLIDE 21

- After picking-up the films at Colorlab, ICFA Departmental Assistant Jessica Cebra updated our film inventory and began to normalize the titles and descriptions for each film.

SLIDE 22

- Afterwards, she reboxed the items in new film cans and added new leaders and labels. As you can see on this slide, we've provided clear labeling and attached the labels on all sides of the film cans – **so they will never be lost again!**

SLIDE 23

- Also under Jessica's guidance, ICFA staff individually bagged the films in archival storage bags to prevent condensation. The films including the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film are safely stored in ICFA's cold storage.

SLIDE 24

- As for the history of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film, we know from the film edge codes and the style of clothing that the film was likely recorded as early as the 1920s through the 1940s.
- Another clue is the Amateur Cinema League or ACL logo, as evident in the opening credits. ACL was a non-commercial association that was founded in New York City on July 28, 1926. It was an association that helped amateur filmmakers and that promoted home motion pictures.

SLIDE 25

- We also found these notes in our legacy files, which record the different scenes on the film and the dates of events. These notes give contexts to the film and especially to the Blisses's whereabouts and activities.
- From the notes and the film, we can see that the Blisses visited Dumbarton Oaks in 1929 from Argentina (maybe for a vacation or for Robert's work), and that they held a State Department Garden Party in 1935 (and maybe that was a reunion for Robert's Foreign Service friends and colleagues).
- While we don't know who wrote these notes and when exactly they were written, the note that I've highlighted on the right is a great clue that the author of these notes may have been a staff member "of the earlier period when Orangery was still spelled in the French fashion."¹⁰

SLIDE 26

- In black-and-white and also in color, the film, first, captures Dumbarton Oaks in its private setting between the 1920s and 1930s.
- On this slide, you see Mildred enjoying lunch at the Orangery and at the swimming pool, surrounded with the couple's close friends and possibly their architect Lawrence White as seen on the left of the slide.
- Furthermore, the film contains garden views in winter and spring, and then summer scenes at the pool, as well as a glimpse of Robert in the gardens as he gracefully shows off the property with friends.
- We can imagine that the Blisses possibly showed this home movie to their friends in D.C. and even possibly to their foreign friends in Europe and South America.

SLIDE 27

- While the film started as a home movie of the Blisses and the Dumbarton Oaks gardens, the film has now transformed into an archival treasure and resource for the staff and our researchers.
- For instance, Dr. Robin Veder, a former fellow of Dumbarton Oaks (2011-2012) and currently an Associate Professor of Humanities and Art History/Visual Culture at Penn State Harrisburg, used the film along with other archival materials for her research, which focused on the 20th century landscape aesthetics and architecture, as well as body culture and movement. She investigated the garden spaces and how the Dumbarton Oaks gardens were used for physical activities starting in the 1920s.
- Furthermore, the film has been a valuable resource to our colleagues in the Gardens and Grounds Department, as well as to our Institutional Archivist. For the first time, they saw a moving account of how the landscape of the Rose Garden or the Ellipse used to look like. And more importantly, the film has been a great compliment to the collection of architectural plans and drawings by Beatrix Farrand.

SLIDE 28

- With this film, we also see the transformation of Dumbarton Oaks from a private residence of Robert and Mildred into a research institute of Harvard University.
- On the left, the filmmaker shows off the overgrown, massive property that used to extend to the Dumbarton Oaks Park, which now belongs to the National Park Service, and on the

right you see a more manicured garden that was inspected by Matthew Kearney, the Superintendent of Gardens and Grounds between 1949 and 1974.

- In conclusion, the “re-discovery” of the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film has been more than a treat to the Dumbarton Oaks staff and community; **it is an archival treasure!**
- My colleagues Gail Griffin, James Carder, and I decided to show this treasure to our community in July 2012. Gail and James made the event extra special by adding narration to the film, which has enhanced this archival resource even more.
- Surely, the Blisses have left us a gem that will not only serve as a personal memory of Robert and Mildred in their mid-life, but it will also serve as an institutional memory of Dumbarton Oaks from now and in the future.

SLIDE 29

- As for what we've learned from this experience:
 - 1) Conduct research (meaning check legacy files and consult with former staff members).
 - 2) Document findings and provide clear labels to archival materials on all sides.
 - 3) Seek advice from specialists in your area.
 - 4) Share the archival treasure to your community, colleagues, and to everyone.

References

¹ Carder, James. A home of the humanities: the collecting and patronage of Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection (2010): 1

² Ibid: 10

³ Ibid: 8

⁴ Ibid: 13

⁵ Ibid: 10

⁶ Historical Note of Beatrix Farrand Architectural Plans and Drawings, Dumbarton Oaks Archives, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C., <http://www.doaks.org/library-archives/dumbarton-oaks-archives/architectural-plans-and-drawings/beatrix-farrand-architectural-plans-and-drawings>.

⁷ For instance, we would have spent \$300 per hour for digitization rather than \$80 per hour for an SD transfer.

⁸ According to an email correspondence with General Manager of Colorlab Dean Plionis in February 2012.

⁹ According to an email correspondence with Preservation Specialists of the Library of Congress Lynanne Schweighofer in November 2011.

¹⁰ According to an email correspondence with Archivist of the Dumbarton Oaks Archives and House Collection Manager James Carder in April 2014.



**“RE-DISCOVERY”
AND THE TRANSFORMATION
OF THE
DUMBARTON OAKS GARDENS FILM**

Rona Razon, Archivist

Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives (ICFA)

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection



MAIN POINTS

- “Re-discovery”
- Research and Documentation
- Preservation



- Transformation

From: Home movie
(personal memory)

To: Institutional archival treasure/resource
(institutional memory)



← Mildred Barnes Bliss in her wedding dress, Paris, 1908. Bliss Papers, HUGFP 76.74p, Harvard University Archives.



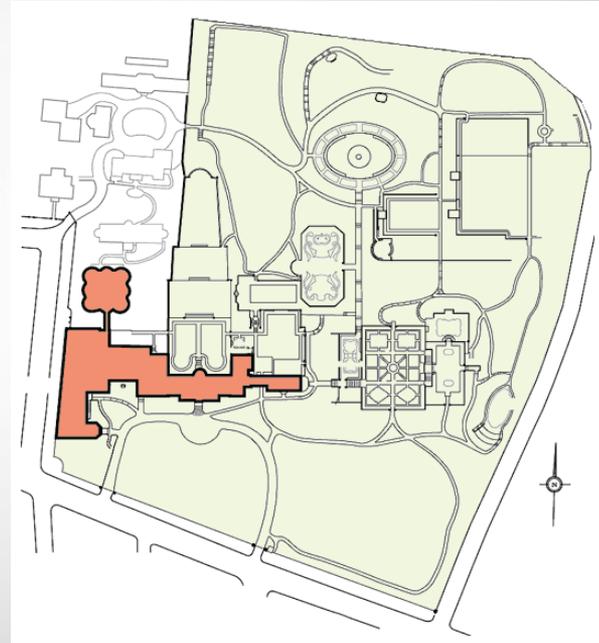
← Robert, center, and Mildred, right, ca. 1926.
Film still from the Dumbarton Oaks Gardens
film.



The Blisses, ca. 1927. Bliss Papers, HUGFP
76.74p, Harvard University →



← Dumbarton Oaks house. Photographed by author, 2013.



Map of the gardens (16 acres) →



Designed by Beatrix Farrand,
American landscape architect and
niece of Edith Wharton

← Herbaceous Border with “Mr.
Yew,” view looking east. Film still
from the Dumbarton Oaks
Gardens film.



The
Dumbarton Oaks
Research Library and Collection
has been assembled and conveyed to Harvard
University
by Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss
that the continuity of scholarship in
the Byzantine and
Mediaeval Humanities
may remain unbroken
to clarify an everchanging present
and to
inform the future with wisdom

ICFA' S COLD STORAGE



Assessed film collection in August 2010 with Luiza Camargo, former ICFA intern



← Black-and-white film of the Red Sea Monasteries of St. Paul and St. Anthony, 1930.

Film documents the first official restoration project undertaken by the Byzantine Institute between 1929 and 1932.



← Thomas Whittemore (left), founder of The Byzantine Institute, and a worker cleaning a mosaic in Hagia Sophia, ca. 1930s-1940s



RESEARCH AND REALIZATION

- Conducted an interview with Natalia Teteriatnikov, former curator of ICFA for more than 20 years (1986-2008)

“RE-DISCOVERY”



FILM INSPECTION – PART I



With Preservation Specialists, Amy Gallick and Lynanne Schweighofer

FILM INSPECTION – PART II



With former Byzantine Assistant Curator, Gnder Varinliođlu

SIGNS OF DETERIORATION



Films with A-D strips, to detect and measure film deterioration



Signs of acetate decay

PRESERVATION/DIGITIZATION



COLORLAB

Today is Tuesday, July 10, 2012
NOW OFFERING HD TELECINE

Our phone and internet service has been restored.

Welcome to Colorlab! We are a full-service film laboratory and telecine house, specializing in 16mm, super-16 and 35mm services for the film archivist and documentary, student, commercial, and independent filmmakers.

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in 1972

Cameraman H. Lee Waters Has Visited Our Town! Connected with Kannapolis, NC through his work.



Colorlab Preserves First Motion Image of President Taft Find out how Colorlab preserved this important historical resource.

Colorlab Offers High-Quality Transfers of Home Movies



Get the same attention & expertise we bring to professional films.



Japanese War Museum Revives a Piece of World History. Colorlab plays integral role in finding and preserving our WWW images.

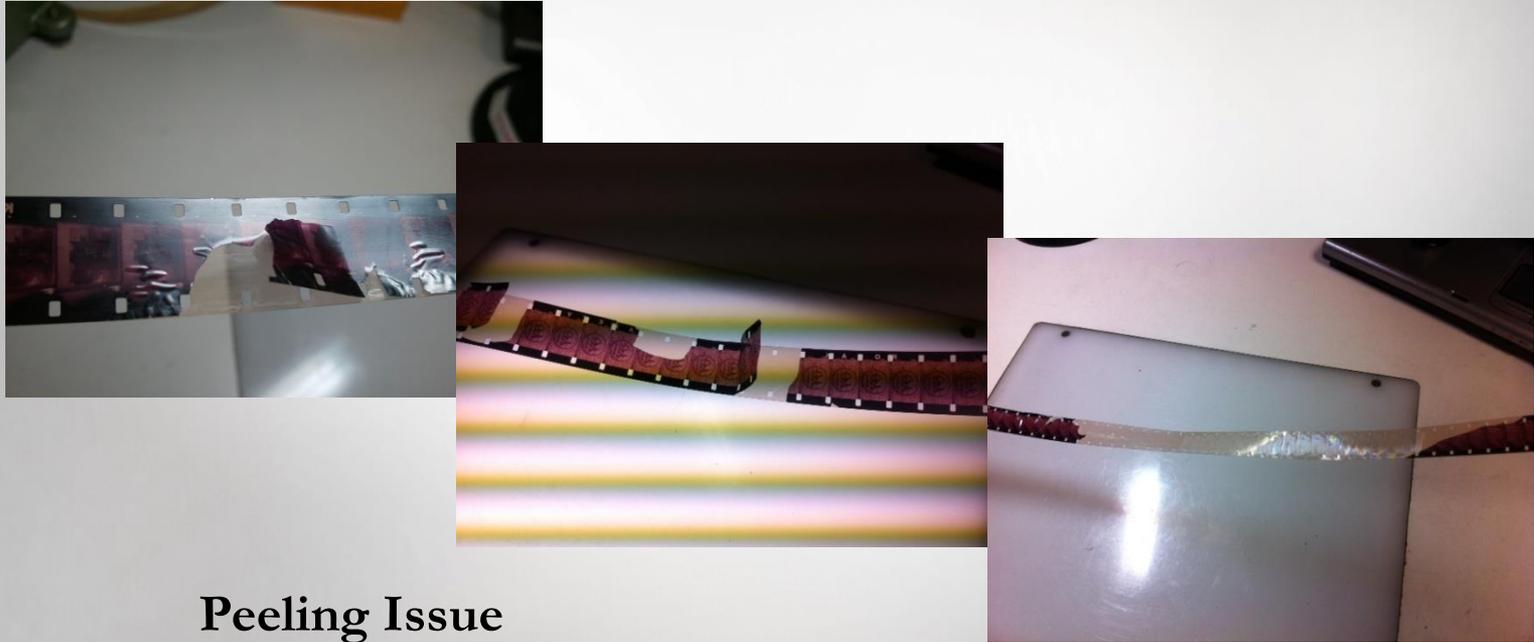


REALITY OF DIGITIZATION

SD = Standard Definition	HD = High Definition
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Standard format• Manageable size files• Affordable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Production format• Requires more storage space• Expensive

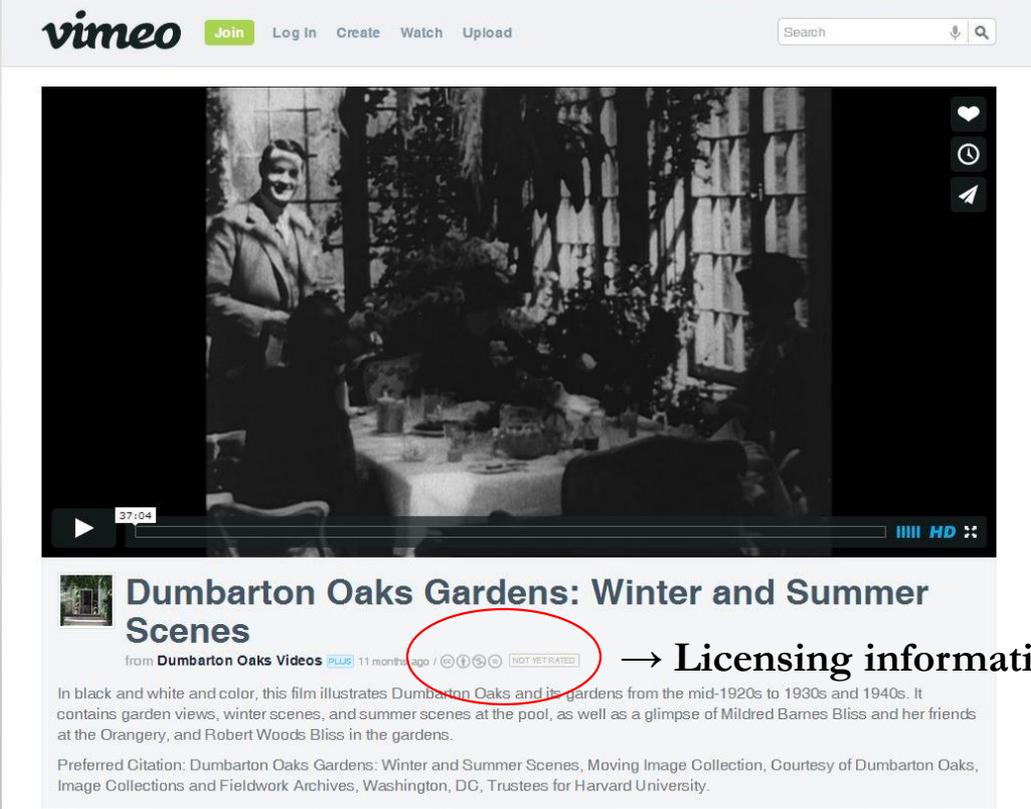
*Badly deteriorated films will likely look the same in HD and SD transfers.

REALITY OF DIGITIZATION



Peeling Issue

Dumbarton Oaks Videos on [Vimeo.com/65327049](https://vimeo.com/65327049)



The screenshot shows a Vimeo video player interface. At the top, the Vimeo logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'Join', 'Log In', 'Create', 'Watch', and 'Upload' are in the center. A search bar is on the right. The video player itself shows a black and white scene of a woman in a garden. Below the video, the title 'Dumbarton Oaks Gardens: Winter and Summer Scenes' is displayed. Underneath the title, there is a row of icons for video settings, including a red circle around the 'CC BY-NC-ND' license icon. To the right of these icons, an arrow points to the text 'Licensing information'. Below the title and icons, there is a short description of the video and a preferred citation.

vimeo Join Log In Create Watch Upload Search

Dumbarton Oaks Gardens: Winter and Summer Scenes

from **Dumbarton Oaks Videos** PLUS 11 months ago / © ⓘ Ⓜ Ⓝ NOT YET RATED → **Licensing information**

In black and white and color, this film illustrates Dumbarton Oaks and its gardens from the mid-1920s to 1930s and 1940s. It contains garden views, winter scenes, and summer scenes at the pool, as well as a glimpse of Mildred Barnes Bliss and her friends at the Orangery, and Robert Woods Bliss in the gardens.

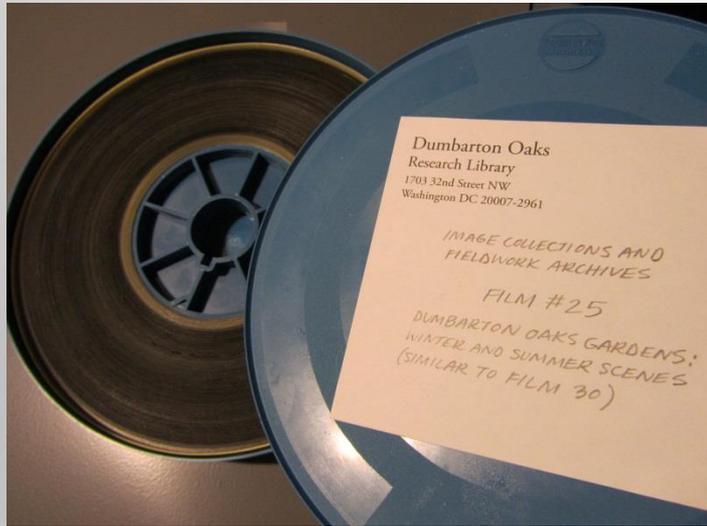
Preferred Citation: Dumbarton Oaks Gardens: Winter and Summer Scenes, Moving Image Collection, Courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks, Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Washington, DC, Trustees for Harvard University.

FINAL PRODUCT – PART I



← Jessica Cebra, Departmental Assistant

FINAL PRODUCT – PART II



HOME SWEET HOME



HISTORY OF THE FILM



Dumbarton Oaks in
Georgetown, Washington, District
of Columbia.
The gardens in their early ^{spring} stages
1929. No Facade
The Bride (Magnolia Conspicua)
April 1929.
The grounds ^{meadows} beyond the Brook;
now Dumbarton Oaks Park.
On the terrace above the Swimming
Pool.

21
Hasty lunch in the Orangerie.
Dumbarton Oaks under snow
January, 1935. ^{Dearden} Box Walk
Rose Garden
Friends around the Swimming Pool
Spring of 1935.
The Lucia learns to swim!
State Department Garden Party
July, 1935.

Clues from ICFA's legacy files

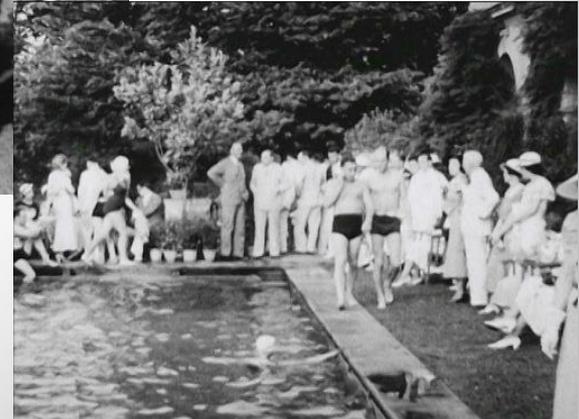
Home Movie



↑ Orangery luncheon with Mildred and Lawrence Grant White, possibly to left, ca. 1926.



↑ Swimming Pool Party, ca. 1933.



↑ Swimming Pool Race, ca. 1936-1938

Archival Resource



Dumbarton Oaks Gardens film was used to study Beatrix Farrand's design and kinesthesia.



← ca. 1920s-1930s. Now part of the
Dumbarton Oaks Park, National Park
Service



Matthew Kearney, ca. 1940s →



LESSONS LEARNED

- Research
- Documentation
- Seek guidance from specialists
- Share

THANK YOU

- Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives (ICFA)

<http://www.doaks.org/icfa>

- ICFA Blog

<https://icfadumbartonoaks.wordpress.com/>

- Dumbarton Oaks on Vimeo

<http://vimeo.com/doaks>

- For questions, contact me at razonr@doaks.org